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2013 Summer Course Development Grant Progress Report

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Innovative Course Development:

Teaching Immigration History through Ethical Community Based Research

Progress Report

I had originally planned to partner with a community group that advocated for those suspected of violating immigration law imprisoned in the for-profit GEO prison in Adelanto to teach students about the current state of immigration. However, at the end of July 2013 prison administrators abruptly cut off all visits from advocates or anyone not related directly to prisoners. Despite my own attempts to gain entry for educational purposes, for-profit prisons have no obligation to the public for transparency or access.

I made major adjustments to my plan to keep what was innovative about my proposal and to incorporate “ethical practices” in working with community partners into my teaching.

In the course that I had targeted for this grant, **HIST 565: Immigration and Ethnic American History**, I invited a guest speaker from the “**Border Angels**” project. This guest spoke about what the “Border Angels” do to advocate for more humane treatment of immigrants, and for aid to immigrants deported across the border far from home villages and with few resources for housing, food, jobs, etc.

When I invited the speaker to class, I invited the students to bring items from home, or to donate items that the volunteers for “Border Angels” delivered to needy deportees across the border. The idea was this individual is giving of her time to speak with the class, but in exchange, we should give something back. The students’ generosity was overwhelming. Students donated toiletries, sanitary items, and many pounds of dry goods such as rice and beans, seasonings, and other long-lasting food stuffs. I had participated in our campus Campesino project in the past, so I used their project as a model. Our guest speaker was really appreciative.

I also taught students that I would never tell them they could not do more with their education if they wanted to, and I introduced them throughout class to ideas of things they could do to learn more about current immigration issues, or to volunteer beyond the scope of the class. I kept telling them about things I did as a student that did not give me extra credit or anything. This included service learning trips to Mexico and Bolivia. I got their attention. I had one student take me up on the offer. She combined an oral history with her grandfather who had emigrated from Mexico as a young man, with a visit to the migrant farmworker housing in the Coachella Valley. She had talked with her grandfather about what she was learning in class and he wanted to go with her to bring food and sanitation items to donate to the community. Another student went to see the sentencing of a migrant from El Salvador who was found to be the main officer responsible for mass murders in El Salvador. Activists from all over Southern California attended the sentencing hearing, where the ex-officer was stripped of his U.S. citizenship for not revealing his criminal activities during the naturalization application process and was ordered for deportation. The student who attended was moved by the experience waiting with activists from all over the area, and from El Salvador waiting and demonstrating on the courthouse steps in anticipation of the verdict.

To encourage students to research how immigration issues touch their own lives, I asked students to do an oral history interview with someone who had immigrated to the United States. Some interviewed their family members, and some interviewed friends or co-workers. Hands down, students were engaged and learned more about people they had known for a long time in the process. One student said, “I’ve always wanted to ask this person more questions but it never seemed like the right time or it just seemed awkward. He was glad to tell me his story, and I was glad to finally be able to ask.” One student realized for the first time that her grandmother had entered the U.S. with borrowed papers and a false identity. Only later in life did she correct the situation and gain legal papers to take her real identity back. This had been a closely held family secret for years. Students spontaneously brought in pictures of family members, old pre-WWII border crossing cards, and many stories that brought the students closer

to one another and closer to the course material. The best part was students were working to understand the subject on their own, not motivated by grades or extra credit alone.

Finally, we took a field trip to the **Border Patrol Headquarters** in San Diego. At the headquarters, the public relations officer introduced us to recent changes in policy and enforcement along the border. Then he took us in an agency vehicle for a tour inside the infrastructure of the border from outside the city all the way to the ocean. Along the way he talked about different issues they have with different sections of the border. He also talked about career opportunities with the Border Patrol. I instructed students to pay attention to the ways I described immigration throughout the course, with our guest from “Border Angels,” with the public relations officer for the Border Patrol. The differences were stark. He used the word “criminals” and criminal element in every other sentence. This is a field trip that was recommended to me by Mike Kahout in Geography, and it was a huge hit. I’ll definitely do it again. We saw some people toying with the border patrol, sitting on the fence, walking on the wrong side of the fence, signaling others. It was just a day in the life of the border patrol. Being there demystified the agency and the place for me and for my students.

Impact on Current Teaching

I usually teach oral history just in my oral history class. But students who were able to get a taste of oral history in the Immigration course were left wanting more. I invited those who were interested to take my oral history course in the spring. And three students did. I will continue having students conduct oral histories in the immigration course. I will also incorporate more biographical readings into the course, and will continue inviting advocate groups to present in class with a companion trip to the border. The most significant outcome came in two forms: 1) students discussed difficult issues of politics, race, immigration, and prejudice in ways that were profound, honest, and frank – more so than in any other course I have taught in the past; and 2) students did take me up on my suggestion that they not wait for a professor to offer extra credit to do more – they became intrinsically motivated to understand the world around them through the lens of immigration. Finally, the border tour was fantastic. Combining guest lectures with the border tour will become a permanent element of this course.

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